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SUBJECT: SYRIAN KURDISH FUTURE MOVEMENT HOLDS GRASSROOTS  
GATHERING

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Despite an ongoing crackdown against all forms of organized political dissent, Machal Tammo, leader of the Kurdish opposition Future Movement, met with college students to discuss politics, society and opportunities for reform on April 29. The meeting seemed to illustrate that even in repressive Syria some opposition groups continue to attempt to organize and build a network at the grassroots level. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On April 28, Poloff attended a discussion group on politics and society held by the Kurdish Future Movement and its leader Machal Tammo for 20 to 25 Kurdish university students. (Note. The Future Movement is a Kurdish opposition group formed last year. End note.) Also in attendance was Damascus representative for the Future Movement, Hervin Osse. The lecture itself was held at a university student's apartment in the evening in the Jebel Mezzeh district of Damascus, a lower income neighborhood that is mixed Kurdish and Alawite. The neighborhood is close to the Presidential Palace and, as a result, there is generally a heavy security service presence in the area. Before the discussion began, which was held without the permission of the government, everybody in attendance switched off their mobile phone - a precaution against eavesdropping by the Syrian intelligence. After a few introductory comments in Arabic the discussion was held entirely in the banned Kurdish language.

¶3. (C) Tammo addressed the gathered crowd first on the disappointment among Syria's Kurdish minority over the recently concluded parliamentary elections. He impressed upon the college-aged attendees that the elections were a failure because there was a lack of understanding of how elections are supposed to permit the people to express their will through the ballot box. Tammo argued that the lack of civic education in Syria resulted in ignorance about the elections. The ignorance coupled with the average Syrian's fear of reprisal from the Syrian security services if they vote in a way not appreciated by the government led to apathy and low turnout among the Syrian electorate, according to Tammo. Tammo asserted that as long as such apathy and fear exist, the regime will never change its behavior toward its people.

¶4. (C) In subsequent comments, Tammo built on his theme of education and knowledge, stressing that it was not only the key to transform the political system, but also the cornerstone for creating a just society. Tammo argued that

true political change can only stem from a society that is well educated. Many in attendance who were also deeply concerned about social issues turned the discussion to the state of the Kurdish family. There were many comments about economic stresses facing Kurdish families, the lack of educational opportunities, and how the two play off one another in a vicious cycle. Some were also concerned about the role of the family in preserving the Kurdish language. Tammo acknowledged the comments of the audience and stressed how the family in the Kurdish community had to be the nexus around which education and learning are centered. Tammo said that the family had to serve as the basis for a liberal and open-minded society that could pass down the Kurdish language to future generations because the Syrian educational system is failing to do so.

15. (C) Comment. The Future Movement's meeting serves as a small snapshot of the level of political organizing in Syria and the difficulties in doing so. It also gives a sense of the level of political conversation taking place among at least some segments of the Kurdish community. The Future Movement is a relative latecomer among Syrian Kurdish political organizations and it is still formulating its identity and political agenda much of which seems focused on young people. Tammo's analysis of the electoral environment in Syria -- which emphasizes citizen's lack of understanding of the power of the ballot box -- runs counter to classic opposition analysis here. Most opposition figures here focus on SARG manipulation or control of the entire process as the key problem that makes voting a futile exercise that merely shores up the regime.

CORBIN